How Joy Division Came to Sound Like Manchester: Myth and Ways of Listening in the Neoliberal City

Leonard Nevarez
Vassar College

Manchester, England, is among the most well-known cities today for the creation and celebration of popular music, thanks in no small part to the group Joy Division. Among the first bands to be associated with a postpunk aesthetic, Joy Division eschewed punk’s youthful rage and unrelenting din for an expansive, anthemically sound distinguished by its dynamic scope, machinic pulses, and by singer Ian Curtis’s sonorous baritone and existential lyrics. As the first significant band to sustain a career in Manchester, thus bypassing the music industry headquartered in London, Joy Division is also recognized as pioneering the DIY tradition that has famously characterized Manchester’s musical economy over the last four decades. The group didn’t achieve this alone; the role of Manchester label Factory Records is well documented, as, increasingly, is the foundation laid by the city’s networks of musicians, scene participants, and cultural institutions (see Crossley; Bottá). Yet these local facts don’t quite explain the contemporary resonance of Joy Division’s Manchester roots for music fans and city boosters today.

Perhaps more than any other Mancunian band, Joy Division are claimed to sound like Manchester, at least the Manchester of a certain era. That is, the group did not just originate from the late 1970s Manchester of deindustrialization, carceral housing estates, Thatcherism, and punk’s youthful refusal; nor do they simply illustrate a recurring Mancunian ethos of creative pluck and insouciant disregard for London’s cultural hegemony (Haslam, Manchester, England). For attentive listeners, Joy Division’s music—in particular their first album, 1979’s Unknown Pleasures, the focus of this article—sonically captures a bygone Mancunian urbanism. Consider the recent testimonies of two Mancunian associates of the group, zine editor Liz Naylor and music journalist Paul Morley:

When Unknown Pleasures came out, it was sort of like, this is the ambient music for my environment. I mean, when I think about Joy Division, they’re an ambient band, almost. You don’t see them
function as a band. It’s just the noise around where you are. . . . It’s like collectively [Joy Division] relayed the aura of Manchester in that period. They are what Manchester was like. (Naylor, quoted in Gee)

It was almost like a science-fiction interpretation of Manchester. You could recognize the landscape and the mindscape and the soundscape as being Manchester. It was extraordinary that they managed to make Manchester international, if you like—make Manchester cosmic. (Morley, quoted in Gee)

These claims, like many from writers and fans alike, support a narrative about Joy Division’s music that emphasizes a unique capacity for urban documentation among Mancunian groups. This narrative stresses how the punk-era Manchester environment has been imprinted upon Curtis’s lyrics, the group’s compositions and performances, and the recordings produced by Martin Hannett so as to create an external, intelligible artifact—a “mindscape,” in Morley’s phrase. Characteristically gazing out into an urban environment, this interiority in turn reveals a socially structured, historically specific relationship between “metropolis and mental life” that analysts following Georg Simmel designate as urbanism. By attuning closely to this recorded mindscape, the listener can “hear” the Manchester of old in Joy Division.

In this article, I do not want to disabuse listeners of the aesthetic pleasures or agreeability of such an interpretation. But as the basis for a theory of how “urban” music signifies, this narrative has at least three problems. First, it espouses a simplistic view of musicians as authors of meaning. Considering how Joy Division were DIY musicians with scant know-how in the studio, who frequently voiced dissatisfaction with how their record producer transformed their live sound, the narrative neglects crucial contributions by noninstrumentalists—in studios and in the dispersed offices where recordings are arranged, released and publicized—to the text that is *Unknown Pleasures*.

Second, the narrative collapses musicians and their creative texts into listeners’ interpretations. The latter especially complicates the meaningfulness of Joy Division’s connections to Manchester, since audiences “hear” creative works differently based, to a significant degree, on their locations in social structure and social context. Geography and history are especially key contexts. What “Manchester” connotes to indigenous Mancunians is
different than what it connotes to Britons not from the north, much less to
listeners from other nations or languages.

Likewise, what “Manchester” connoted during the late 1970s is not
simply preserved in memory that is enacted in the present, which raises the
third problem. The narrative in which Joy Division sounds like Manchester
is, in important regards, a retrospective one, achieving its greatest salience
over the last fifteen years. If this contention seems to reject the views of
Mancunians who recognize firsthand the alienation and desolation conveyed
by Joy Division’s music, in actuality it only highlights the mediation of
history, geography, social relations, and technology involved in the act of
listening. It further raises the question, what are the contemporary contexts
in which people might perceive Joy Division to sound like the Manchester
of old?

Put differently, this narrative is a myth about what Manchester
“was like” that resonates with present-day concerns about encountering
and consuming cities. By questioning this Manchester myth of Joy Division,
this article highlights its status as an aesthetic sensibility not of the band’s
making; examines how this aesthetic sensibility increased in salience over
time; and suggests the intellectual and political stakes when such an aesthetic
sensibility frames a contemporary interest in cities. Joy Division offers an
apt case study for exploring other myths that listeners and urbanists alike
invoke when they assert that a particular band or music “sounds like” a
particular place.

The Indexicality of Joy Division

My analysis in this article follows a hermeneutic perspective that
starts with the indexicality or ambiguous referent of the sign—in this
case, the music, biography, and historic legacy that “Joy Division” (the
idea) represents. In this perspective, meanings do not emerge immediately
and stably from signs and their encapsulation in language—verbal, visual,
aural, or otherwise. Instead, people project meanings onto ambiguous
signs by interactively assigning referents and establishing contexts of
relevance (Garfinkel). Generally, these referents and contexts go unspoken
and are never fixed, insofar as social conditions, both micro/situational
and macro/structural, continually change, and as some individuals and
groups intervene in connotative enterprises with special framing capacities
(Gotttdiener). Symbolic systems and the meaning of signs, then, are collective
accomplishments that arise over the course of history, its social contexts, and the contingent interactions of actors with signs and with each other.

The data to support my argument come from music press coverage, academic literature, and publicly released films on Joy Division—a hybrid archive culled from bibliographies, user-generated websites and forums, and Internet searches (Google Scholar, JSTOR, the Rock’s Back Pages archive, etc.). Although I cannot claim that I identified every potential element in this archive, I made special efforts to track down sources published during the band’s four-year existence, as well as more recent works that address contemporary interest in the band. The latter material overlaps somewhat with the recent press and academic literature on the renaissance of Manchester as an international “Pop City.”

The indexicality of Joy Division’s music is underscored by the relative paucity of information and publicity surrounding the band during their 1977–1981 career. “Their brief flourish occurred just before the full onset of the promo video age and the increase in broadcast outlets that happened after 1982,” writes music journalist and documentarian Jon Savage. “Compared to today’s oversaturation of up-and-coming rock bands, they were underexposed” (“Unseen Pleasures”). The band received considerable attention from British music weeklies and fanzines, but interviews were rare (eventually drying up altogether when the band’s other members protested against journalists’ primary focus on Curtis), and typically the band said very little in them. Their televised performances were so infrequent as to become key events in the posthumous collective memory of the band. Fans from northern England might have caught the band’s first two appearances on regional television, but Joy Division reached a national TV audience only by September 1979, three months after Unknown Pleasures’ release, and never appeared in a program on the scale of Top of the Pops. Overall, listeners heard Joy Division largely through recordings, concerts, and through their frequent spot on John Peel’s radio show—channels that were restricted by the extant frictions of nationalized media and licensing regimes, a spotty export system for independent music, and a fairly undeveloped touring infrastructure for punk groups (Joy Division played only eleven concerts outside the British Isles, all in Western Europe).

Significantly, Ian Curtis never sang explicitly about Manchester’s specific landmarks or neighborhoods, nor did he really make any concrete references to Mancunian life. Believing that listeners should be able to arrive at their own interpretations, the group consistently refused to clarify
the music’s meanings and inspirations, with lyric sheets appearing only in posthumous releases. Famously, the design and packaging of Joy Division’s Factory Records releases conveyed almost no information about the band at all. How then could their “Mancunianness” be discerned? Mancunians might recognize the band (or its earlier incarnations, Stiff Kittens and Warsaw) as one of their own, but even this local identification—in a music club, or by word of mouth—occurred in the broader context of Britain’s cultural and media geography.

England’s cultural imaginary has long been shaped by its industrial revolution geography that concentrated politics, trade, and culture in London, made industry primary in Manchester and other northern cities, and relegated agriculture to the countryside. Notably, this geography of core and periphery shaped the explosion of British pop music culture in the 1960s. The Mersey beat did not escape the centrality of London, with The Beatles and their machinery being the first to leave Liverpool for London; and initially, punk further reinforced London’s centrality to British pop music. The list of British punk and postpunk groups who signed with record labels in London is long, and includes The Buzzcocks and The Fall, the two most significant Manchester contemporaries of Joy Division.

One consequence is that prior to punk, urban symbolism aside from London motifs and stories was relatively undeveloped in British pop music (see Du Noyer). Other cities and regions would be referenced, of course—Sheffield Steel (a Joe Cocker album), the association of heavy metal with the British midlands, etc.—but it is likely that the British countryside inspired greater musical reverence and place-specific contemplations than did other cities outside London (Young). While this is often attributed to the parochialism of Britain’s music industry and other mass media, the fairly late development of serious music journalism in Britain also has to be considered. Only in the early 1970s did Britain’s music weeklies develop a narrative function beyond mere publicity, when they adopted the countercultural voice of late 1960s underground weeklies like International Times and Oz and American publications like Rolling Stone and Creem. A focus on the culture surrounding rock and pop was the special hallmark of the NME (New Musical Express). The other key music weeklies, Melody Maker and Sounds, were slow to shift out of the publicity function, but the arrival of punk helped usher in this new journalistic mission (Gorman 174). The shift of music press attention to pop music’s social and cultural locales was only fully established with the late 1970s appearance of punk bands and scenes across the isles. It was in this changing media
environment that the process of making Joy Division sound like Manchester began.

**Interpretive Interventions**

Following their June 1978 name change to Joy Division, the group drew increasingly favorable attention from punters, first in the north, and then in the British music press, soon cultivating a following sometimes caricatured as “miserable young men in raincoats” (Champion 12). A 1979 assessment from Mick Middles, *Sounds*’ Manchester correspondent and future Curtis biographer, illustrates the prevailing impression made by the group: they made “serious pop” and introduced “a sound so tight it almost strangles the involved listener. It is a completely original experience” (Middles). As much as journalists and fans might associate Joy Division with the city’s music scene, it is unclear whether or not the members themselves had much interest in elaborating urban resonances in their music. However, some of their collaborators and commentators did, starting with Tony Wilson, co-founder and mogul of Factory Records, the independent Manchester label that signed Joy Division in 1978. These connotative efforts established a template for the Manchester myth of Joy Division that would become most salient two decades later.

*Tony Wilson*

One strand of the myth is a dystopian urbanism that characterizes crumbling industrial cities, not just Manchester, through various critical perspectives. Of the latter, much has been said about the influence of the French situationists, their interests in “psychogeography,” and their method of *dérive*—an act of critical meandering through urban settings so as to reimagine and reclaim their structuring force on everyday life—on Factory Records and on Tony Wilson. The Factory catalogue reveals several situationist references (notably the Durutti Column and the Hacienda club), and John McCready has documented Wilson’s involvement with situationist-inspired actions in Britain after 1968. From this evidence, McCready identifies a strong situationist strain in Joy Division’s music:

But it was Joy Division who made the deepest, most original and least nakedly reverential reference to the Situationist legacy and its obsessions with psychogeography and the *dérive*—ideas concerned
with the emotional impact of city spaces on the individual and the exploration of a city’s darker corners fuelled by drink and even deliberate sleep deprivation . . . In the world of ideas passed about the Factory se(c)t in the late ’70s, Unknown Pleasures would have seemed a perfect psychogeographical soundtrack. Ian Curtis intones bleakly of walking through the city limits, of drinking and shadowy passers-by, of rust and decay and sinister cars waiting outside in “the centre of the city in the night.” (96–97)

However, McCready’s retrospective exegesis does not in fact establish whether Joy Division were particularly versed or even interested in situationism at the time. Autodidacts of the punk era, band members would sometimes cite books and thinkers in interviews, but the coverage that survives shows no mention of situationism.

Joy Division’s indifference to urban framings, psychogeographic or otherwise, is suggested by the band’s first TV appearance, on Tony Wilson’s What’s On program for Manchester’s Granada TV, on September 20, 1978 (filmed shortly before they signed with Factory). As Joy Division performed “Shadowplay” (“To the centre of the city where all roads meet / Waiting for you”), the show’s producers projected images of highway traffic and industrial cityscapes behind the group on a blue screen. Evidently the band was “aghast” at “the utterly pedestrian subject matter of these World In Action documentary reels” (Ott 44). Their qualms may have had more to do with the cheap production quality of the footage, but they nonetheless suggest that the group was not overly anxious to graphically depict their ostensible psychogeography.

Paul Morley

A specifically Mancunian essence was projected onto Joy Division’s music by Paul Morley, a Manchester native and NME correspondent. After writing several increasingly favorable live reviews of the band beginning with their first gig on May 29, 1977, Morley featured Joy Division in his January 13, 1979 NME cover story on “Manchester: New Sounds.” In contrast to the now forgotten Spherical Objects and The Passage, the other two bands featured in the story, Joy Division were fairly inarticulate before Morley’s tape recorder. The journalist was undeterred, as he later recalled:
Despite how withdrawn [Ian] could be in interviews, maybe hiding most of what he was thinking for whatever personal reason, and how opaque his band mates could be, not wanting to give the game away just in case in the end there was nothing to give away, I was slowly finding more and more to say about them. There was more of a story, even though the story mostly consisted of them looking, or waiting, or hoping, or praying, for a break. (90)

Joy Division quickly became Morley’s muse as no other band did. Writing about them stimulated the development of his signature style of music journalism—what he called the “investigations of inner worlds” and the verbose elaboration of “farfetched” ideas (Haslam, “Smoker in a Trenchcoat”). Morley had long identified “the detached, philosophical Manchester thing” as a common thread among local bands, other Manchester performers like poet John Cooper Clarke, and local labels like New Hormones and Factory (89). But Joy Division drew out vividly personal reflections on place:

Yet I recognised from songs that were abstract, grandiose and gothic the landscape they were describing—my local area. In a guitar lick or a drum pattern or Ian singing about the blood of Christ, you’d go, “Oh, it’s Stockport!” “There are the hills outside Macclesfield,” “That’s the sound of Salford drizzle,” “There’s time hanging limp in the still air above Manchester.” (Morley 109)

Characteristically, Morley’s Mancunian riffs on Joy Division had an eerie, science fiction quality. Manchester “seemed quite futuristic,” the journalist recently told Simon Reynolds. “It was a hard city. And people were using their minds to find a way out of a hard situation” (Reynolds 326). He established a narrative tradition of locating Joy Division’s environmental resonances within a cognitive prism, as generated by the lyrics and figure of Ian Curtis, but also by the band’s performances and Hannett’s production work. “And so I suppose I’m saying, this time, that with the music of Joy Division we can see inside a mind,” he would write later (Morley 271).

---

Jon Savage

The elements of Joy Division’s Mancunian myth of situationism and Mancunian geography were fused in the writings of Jon Savage. He
began his professional writing career in London, where he had already intuited that “the relationship of Punk to urbanism was intense and integral” (Savage, “The Things That Aren’t There Anymore” 183). Yet his first trip to Manchester in October 1977 made an especially powerful impression. There he attended the final punk shows held at the Electric Circus (captured on Virgin Records’ Short Circuit: Live at the Electric Circus, the first Joy Division recording) for Sounds and snapped pictures that he published thirty years later in the academic journal Critical Quarterly: “These photos were taken . . . for no overt purpose, except as a visual diary of a disturbing new landscape that, like the city itself, the music and its people, triggered an almost overwhelming emotional response—to the extent that eighteen months later, I would return there to make my home” (Savage, “The Things That Aren’t There Anymore” 181).

In Manchester, Savage became Melody Maker’s correspondent, worked at Granada TV, came into contact with the Factory Records crew via Tony Wilson, and even observed some of the recording of Unknown Pleasures. Like fellow Cambridge alumnus Wilson, Savage had an affinity for situationism, and it was in Manchester that he found others who shared his more academic interests in cities. “Some of us were obsessed with cities and architecture and urban planning. We would drive about endlessly and obsess on the spatial aspects of the urban environment” (quoted in McCready 97). These assorted experiences were distilled into Savage’s review of Unknown Pleasures for Melody Maker:

“To the centre of the city in the night waiting for you . . .” Joy Division’s spatial, circular themes and Martin Hannett’s shiny, waking-dream production gloss are one perfect reflection of Manchester’s dark spaces and empty places: endless sodium lights and hidden semis seen from a speeding car, vacant industrial sites—the endless detritus of the 19th century—seen gaping like rotten teeth from an orange bus. Hulme seen from the fifth floor on a threatening, rainy day . . . This is not, specifically, to glamourise; it could be anywhere. Manchester, as a (if not the) city of the Industrial Revolution, happens only to be a more obvious example of decay and malaise. (“Joy Division: Unknown Pleasures”)

In contrast to Paul Morley’s idiosyncratic, hallucinatory vision, Savage’s writings on Joy Division asserted that the band’s music mirrored the actual dark spaces and empty places of Manchester and other British cities.
This might seem ironic for a critic who disdained punk’s turn in 1977 toward “social realism” (Savage, *England’s Dreaming* 202). Yet Savage’s writings on Joy Division’s Mancunian connections reveal a consistent if unmarked psyche, *his own*, as it navigates the city. “I was living in Manchester then, a Londoner transplanted to the North West,” he wrote fifteen years later. “Joy Division helped me orient myself in the city. I saw this new environment through their eyes—‘Down the dark street, the houses look the same’—and felt it through the powerful atmosphere they generated on records and in concert” (quoted in Curtis xii). By conveying the experience of *discovering* Manchester that maybe eluded most native Mancunians, Savage established a narrative template for outsiders’ Manchester discoveries long after Joy Division came to an end.

*Early Visualizations of Joy Division*

If the connotative interventions of Wilson, Morley, and Savage laid a foundation for the contemporary Manchester myth of Joy Division, photography and films of the band underscore the ambiguous, polysemous nature of “Joy Division” (the sign) during the band’s existence. For the January 1979 *NME* cover story, photographer Kevin Cummins captured two iconic images: the “smoker in a trenchcoat” portrait of Ian Curtis (later used for the cover of Deborah Curtis’s 1995 memoir) and the band on a snowy Epping Walk in Hulme, not far from Manchester’s city center. (This work is now collected in a book of Cummins’s photography, *Juvenes: Joy Division*.) Ten months later, Anton Corbijn’s shoot for the *NME* produced another famous photo (later used for the cover of Paul Morley’s 2007 collection of writings, *Joy Division*) of the band standing in a London tube station tunnel: three members calmly gaze away, hands in pockets, while Curtis acknowledges the camera with an ambiguous certainty.

Indelibly associated with Joy Division, these images, all in black and white, still bear a visual mystery that is worth considering. For Cummins’s shoot, the band offered to pose in front of a curved building near Manchester’s Victoria Station; instead, Cummins suggested the Epping Walk Bridge as a symbol of their ambitions, he wrote later, located as it was on the “road out of Manchester” (quoted in Cooper). Mancunians might recognize the housing estates behind the bridge (which appear more prominently in other pictures from this shoot), but the photo’s power derives in part from its alien geography; there’s no identifying signage in the shot, and the atypical snowfall (for which the band seems woefully underdressed)
makes the bridge resemble a lunar surface. The Corbijn tube station photo is more “realistic” in its evocation of the modern city, albeit in this case not Manchester; once again signage or other background features that would identify this London setting are excluded. If these images capture a band “in its natural environment,” viewers might well wonder kind of environment this could be: a place of origin, a generic city, a dystopian sci-fi setting, or an imaginary mindscape.

An alternate, explicitly Mancunian set of Joy Division images were generated by punk-inspired Mancunian filmmakers. In No City Fun (1979), Charles Salem set songs from Unknown Pleasures’ side one (marked “outside” on the LP label) to a visual voyage through Manchester and text from City Fun zine editor Liz Naylor. “The camera roams the city to find the forgotten zones which tell an existential truth: the monolithic crescents of Hulme, wastelands full of rubble and parked cars . . . . The camera flick[s] past shiny consumer visions, but at the same time an underlying reality came through: newspaper headlines shrieking ‘NW Pit Horror,’ a church placard reading ‘No Future with the Neutron Bomb: The dead need no homes’” (Savage, “The Things That Aren’t There Anymore” 194). For Joy Division (1979), Malcolm Whitehead interspersed an impressionistic collage of alienating urbanism (Manchester street scenes, crass advertisements, chief constable James Anderton) with footage of Joy Division performing three songs at the Bowdon Vale Youth Club and an interview with band manager Rob Gretton. Both the Salem and Whitehead films were screened in London on September 13, 1979, giving Londoners a uniquely psychogeographic experience of Manchester—in rare color film, no less. Factory Records even assigned this screening (which included two other shorts featuring A Certain Ratio and Ludus) a label number and title, FAC 9: Factory Flick. Yet soon thereafter, both films fell into obscurity, to resurface only in the new millennium in Grant Gee’s 2007 Joy Division documentary.

Ian Curtis Buried

Ian Curtis committed suicide on May 18, 1980, on the eve of Joy Division’s first tour of the United States and weeks before the group’s second album, Closer, was released. While this story is well known, what’s sometimes forgotten today is how his suicide and the group’s second album soon wrapped public memory of the group around the persona of Ian Curtis to the neglect of his fellow bandmates, who quickly reformed as New Order, and the group’s connections to Manchester, whose banner was hoisted
by a new generation of groups. The powerful emotional register of Joy Division’s music (which posthumously reached the mainstream UK charts), New Order’s obscure allusions (the title of their debut album track “I.C.B.” was often understood to mean “Ian Curtis Buried”), and the still unexplained circumstances of his death (for which Closer and “Love Will Tear Us Apart” were popular ciphers) transformed Curtis into an existential cult figure of increasingly worldwide popularity. The cult of Ian Curtis probably reached its zenith with the 1988 Joy Division compilation Substance, for two reasons. First, Factory Records assembled it to take advantage of New Order’s commercial momentum in the United States, where nonimport Joy Division recordings were previously unavailable; lacking ten years of music press coverage and publicity, US listeners had considerable freedom to reimagine Joy Division free of the group’s parochial connotations. Second, to promote the album, Anton Corbijn directed a promotional video for the track “Atmosphere” with arguably the most fantastical imagining of Joy Division: a black and white vision in which shrouded dwarves scurry to and fro on a featureless dune hoisting a giant photo of Curtis.

Meanwhile, Manchester provided an explicit point of reference for the musicians, DJs, and dance acts that fueled the city’s musical vibrancy through the 1980s and 1990s. Most notably, the Smiths made specific references to Manchester, refracted through a kitchen sink nostalgia for 1950s–1960s working class culture, a hallmark of their lyrics. A photo for their 1986 album The Queen is Dead set the band in front of Manchester’s Salford Lads’ Club, with the building’s identifying signage a pointed contrast to Joy Division’s imagery (Halfacree and Kitchin 51). By the time of the Stone Roses’ ascent and the “Madchester” nightlife explosion a few years later, identifying the city in lyrics or graphics was almost moot, as the city’s reputation for fusing independent rock with new sounds in dance music had become celebrated enough to precede its new acts and nightlife venues before the eyes and ears of outsiders.

The restoration of Joy Division’s Manchester myth came about gradually amidst these prevailing discourses. A major event was the 1995 publication of Deborah Curtis’s memoir, Touching from a Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division, which reframed the interest in Ian Curtis around her husband’s real life up through his final days. With a foreword by Jon Savage, the book exposed Ian Curtis’s struggles with epilepsy, and the band as Manchester lads with all-too-human foibles. Adding a twist to the personification of Joy Division’s memory, the memoir restored the older, less shiny Manchester to the group’s story. By the time Deborah Curtis’s
story reached the silver screen, Manchester would be starkly different from the city Ian Curtis had lived in.

Scenes From Manchester's Regeneration

The 1997 closing of the Hacienda and Factory Records are often considered rubicon events in the story of "Pop City" Manchester. However much of a defeat they signaled for Manchester’s punk-era DIY legacy, by that time the city’s musical and economic rise was no longer a grassroots undertaking; urban regeneration via the Labour Party’s promotion of public-private redevelopment partnerships had begun steering the city’s transformation. What began in the late 1980s with museum-building and urban heritage landmarking had by the mid-1990s turned into redevelopment incursions into the city’s center and neglected neighborhoods (While and Short 7). Upgrading their aspirations for Manchester to become a “European city” worthy of global attention, city elites and boosters targeted economic development and urban branding strategies around developing Manchester’s profile in service-sector jobs (to replace the city’s venerable industrial sectors), sports (from the city’s storied football clubs to its failed bids for the Olympic and Commonwealth Games), research and education (the University of Manchester), and continental culture (from the ubiquity of fine dining and cafés to the (also) failed bid for European Capital of Culture status). The 1996 IRA bomb in the city center, which “destroyed more than 1.5 million square feet of prime retail and office space,” especially accelerated the pace of redevelopment in Manchester (“Manchester Millennium”; see also Bottá; Peck and Ward.

Local music played only a supporting role in Manchester’s urban regeneration strategies, perhaps surprisingly given the dozens of bands, DJs, and musicians who seemed to move in each month, not to mention the well-documented hundreds of university applicants drawn to the city’s music/clubbing scene. Although some areas like the Northern Quarter were rebuilt into bohemian amenity districts, regeneration mostly emphasized housing developments and commercial infrastructure for a more affluent, less scrappy demographic (see Bottá; Hatherley). The 1997 sale of the Free Trade Hall (the legendary venue for Manchester concerts by Bob Dylan and The Sex Pistols) to private developers and the defunct Hacienda’s 2002 demolition illustrate the wide sweep of regeneration under way when 24 Hour Party People (2002, dir. Michael Winterbottom), the first full-length film depicting Joy Division, appeared. Telling the story of Tony Wilson and
Factory Records, the comic drama positioned Joy Division as an opening chapter of the city music scene it celebrated, with the tragedy of Curtis’s suicide giving way to the exuberant rise of dance music. Even as it asserted the group’s influence on Manchester music to a generation that might not have known about them, *24 Hour Party People* was hardly the last word on Joy Division.

If the eagerness of new bands on both sides of the Atlantic (Interpol, The Rapture, Bloc Party et al.) to revive the 1978–1984 postpunk sound had not done enough to put Joy Division back into cultural circulation, 2007’s *Control*, a second feature-length depiction of Joy Division, may have done the trick. Anton Corbijn’s debut as a feature film director, *Control* drew primarily from Deborah Curtis’s memoir (crediting her as a co-producer) and accordingly focused the group’s legacy around the persona of Ian Curtis. Yet in formal aspects it introduced a new kind of urban framing. In contrast to the color palette of *24 Hour Party People*, *Control* was filmed in Corbijn’s signature saturated black and white tones. This was controversial given the film’s mass-market ambitions, but it gave the film’s depictions of the group a measure of authenticity, if not historicity, by simulating both the chromatic viewpoint of old film and iconic visualizations of Joy Division (bassist Peter Hook has said, “I only visualise [Joy Division] in bleak monochrome” (quoted in Cooper)). Thus *Control* ushered in a period of retrospective efforts to dwell upon the now bygone Manchester—even if, in this case, the city was recreated on location in Nottingham (Hatherly 119).

While *Control* was in production, the knowledge that the biopic emphasized drama over fact created the opening for a third feature-length film about the band, Grant Gee’s 2007 documentary *Joy Division*. Jon Savage wrote the screenplay, and his involvement focused the project on “root[ing] Joy Division in their time and place” (Savage, “Unseen Pleasures”). Significantly, the filmmakers acknowledged an unavoidable element of “myth-making” from the onset, as indicated in an email to Paul Morley inviting him to participate in a public master class coinciding with the documentary’s premiere:

> The class will concentrate on the production process of the film, so we’ll have the director, writer, editor and producer on stage, and the idea is to tease anecdotes out of them on how they approached capturing the story and dealing with the legacy of such an influential band. The film is also about myth-making and Manchester. I imagine
that you will have things to say about this yourself. (quoted in Morley 363)

Gee and Savage dug out the short films by Salem and Whitehead and took their dérive spirit of re-imagining the city to heart. As Savage related:

We went on many night drives around Manchester, as we did back in the day, which occasioned some happy accidents—like when we found an aircraft fuselage in a warehouse car park. Grant also projected the Super 8s onto buildings from the car and re-filmed the moving image. So Malcolm Whitehead’s Joy Division and Charles Salem’s No City Fun really helped us in the style of the documentary. (quoted in Holman)

As film scholar Constantine Ververis observes, “The idea that Joy Division is a kind of environmental or ‘ambient’ band—one that engages in a psychogeographical articulation of the modern city—is literalized in Joy Division” (239). But the “modern city” in Joy Division is pointedly a lost city, disappeared by the forces of urban capitalism. Savage inserted the phrase “The Things That Aren’t There Anymore” as a caption to the film’s juxtapositions of Joy Division’s old settings to the theme pubs and condominium apartments standing in their present place. Also the title of his accompanying article in Critical Quarterly, the phrase voiced a broader compulsion in the new millennium to restore the urbanism of bygone Manchester from the delirious boosterism of the present. Around this time, scholarly inquiries into the “hauntology” of Joy Division began to appear, most prominently in the writings of Mark Fisher (a.k.a. k-punk), who heralded the group for embodying a city’s past and having encoded its future haunting into their ghostly sonics and Curtis’s existential dread. Fisher assessed the group’s significance through his characteristic concern for the psychology generated by the neoliberal capitalism then surfacing under Thatcher: “Nothing could have been more fitting than that Unknown Pleasures began with a track called ‘Disorder’, for the key to Joy Division was the Ballardian spinal landscape, the connexus linking individual psychopathology with social anomic” (Fisher).

Befitting its historical aims, Gee’s documentary strove to bring the cult of Ian Curtis to an end. Bernard Sumner’s moving comments about childhood traumas of family deaths and neighborhood displacement stand in for the alienation felt by the other band members and by working-class or
lower-middle-class Mancunians of their generation. The film’s strenuous efforts to recreate the time and place that gave rise to the band, and to elicit some two dozen informants’ agreement with the veracity of its depiction, left viewers with the powerful sense that this is what Manchester was really like back then. It thereby avoided an alternate conclusion, that the “authenticity” of the film’s depictions of the old city resides somewhere other than Manchester itself.

**Contexts For Listening**

*Unknown Pleasures* is also a very iPodded kind of world. It’s urban, but it’s not. It’s about a landscape, but that landscape is primarily an interior landscape. And so, what is very, very important about it now is to see where we’ve travelled from since then and exactly why it still sounds so bloody contemporary. (Wozencroft, quoted in Gee)

This description by writer and graphic designer Jon Wozencroft of Joy Division’s first album as “iPodded” illuminates the ways in which Joy Division’s memory is mediated today. Like Savage, Wozencroft refutes more parochial perspectives, offering the possibility that Joy Division’s relevant landscapes are not confined to Manchester or to the past. Furthermore, he evokes the pleasurable solipsism or “chill urbanism” felt by even the most alienated postindustrial flaneur who navigates urban spaces under the spell of a personal soundtrack (Bull 8–9). In so doing, he suggests the central role of audio technologies in customizing listeners’ experiences and stratifying interpretations (see Rojek). Yet Wozencroft’s choice of phrase is anachronistic; the first iPods were not available until 2001.

This raises the question, how might someone have listened to Joy Division in 1979? A lucky few in Britain and Western Europe saw the group in concert, but most listeners had only the band’s recordings to turn to. These most likely would have been on vinyl, a medium that characteristically confines the listener to a proximate radius around a stationary record player. True, *Unknown Pleasures* was also released on cassette (the first in Factory Records’ catalogue) and conceivably could have been listened to on a Sony Walkman, which also debuted in 1979; however, the device’s original high price suggests that not too many punters took *Unknown Pleasures* on their walks while the group was active. As well, radio could liberate the listener from a fixed setting, although it should not be overstated how often Joy
Division was broadcast (John Peel notwithstanding) before Ian Curtis’s death.

Thus, in 1979 a typical listening experience would have been spatially contained, probably in the domestic space of a bedroom or another room where a stereo was located. For a multimedia experience of sorts, the listener could simultaneously gaze at *Unknown Pleasures*’ record cover, read an article about the group, or “swoon over the photography on the covers of the music press” (Kennedy 160). Such a setting would facilitate a different kind of solitary, solipsistic experience of Joy Division’s music than the one Wozencraft evokes. Perhaps prompted by Martin Hannett’s cavernous production, the listener might seek an object or theme to alight upon. Ostensibly, the Mancunian references offered up by imagery and writing about the band would offer fertile terrain for imagining landscapes that inspired the music. Yet as this scenario suggests, the associations that listeners might make between real place (Manchester), artistic consciousness (“what might have motivated the band”), and aesthetic response (the “interior landscapes” that listeners inhabit) would involve self-evident exertions of imagination—of myth-making.

By contrast, today’s listeners can easily take Joy Division’s music with them. And while their listening is no less mediated in the present day, in the regenerated Manchester they can access “authentic” opportunities to rehabit the spaces trod by the band over thirty years ago. A Joy Division walking tour was just one part, but by far the most publicity-generating part, of the Macclesfield Silk Museum’s 2010 exhibit, “Unknown Pleasures: The Life/Work of Ian Curtis and Joy Division,” curated with assistance from Jon Savage. That same year, a campaign was launched to rename Hulme’s Epping Walk Bridge in honor of Ian Curtis. Alongside innumerable local exhibits and conferences recognizing Manchester’s music and (a new cause célèbre) the late Tony Wilson’s memory, Manchester today seems fixated on the figures and contributions of its musical past. “Nobody can leave history to its own decomposing devices,” McCready observes. “Many of us have made a good living sifting the remains” (McCready 93).

However, viewing the contradictions of Manchester’s musical renaissance as a local story—as does, for instance, Owen Hatherley’s criticism of the roles played by Tony Wilson and a local “post-rave urban growth coalition” in the city’s property-led regeneration (120)—loses sight of the broadest context for hearing Manchester today. For the iPodded listener is a mobile aesthete, a type for which boosters compete vigorously when they rebrand Manchester as a “creative city” or center for cosmopolitan culture.
Quite rightly, their regeneration strategies treat visitors to the “Unknown Pleasures” exhibit or almost any other Manchester attraction as discerning consumers with many options to choose from, many cities to visit or move to (see Quilley). These strategies tread lightly upon the urban alienation that originally inflamed the city’s punk generation; they also neglect the socioeconomic and spatial inequalities that still divide Manchester today (see Harding, Harloe, and Rees). Nonetheless, city boosters correctly discern that a ready-made program for “hearing the city” gives Manchester a distinctive asset in the global competition for place consumers. They make the final contribution to Joy Division’s Mancunian myth, giving it an embodied, organized form for visitors’ consumption.

Conclusion

A musical act from a city does not immediately connote the “urban,” much less (as Joy Division’s Manchester myth goes) the aesthetic expression of an alienated psyche navigating the carceral industrial city. Any “urban” interpretation must first be asserted in collective arenas, to frame diverse meanings and to prevail upon other, nonurban discourses from which listeners might interpret music. This article has reviewed the interventions by crucial interpretive entrepreneurs: music journalists and DIY music publicists who advanced interpretations to a national audience about Joy Division’s urbanism that eventually shaped the aesthetic and biographical common wisdom surrounding the group. This article has also illustrated how the salience and credibility of “urban” interpretations rest upon the contingent development of social contexts in which listeners are embedded. In the case of Joy Division, two central contexts—(1) a neoliberal urban policy regime that, in Manchester, advances a specifically “Mancunian” experience over previously salient discourses (England’s north, the industrial city, the working class, etc.); and (2) the advent of mobile listening technologies that customize the individual’s musical encounter with the city—only became the dominant experiential frames some ten to twenty years after the group’s demise.

That these two contexts continue to evolve and reciprocally influence each other outside of Manchester and the example of Joy Division (e.g., the proliferation of urban music festivals and creative city strategies) suggests what’s at stake in scholarly and journalistic considerations of the “sounds of the city.” To state the issue bluntly, if the celebrity of music personalities increases publication sales and website traffic, does the celebration of
music cities stoke property values? Clearly, the aesthetic sensibility behind the Manchester myth of Joy Division is no simple commodity impulse. The critical projects and careful research of many who contributed to this aesthetic sensibility are anathema to the crass theming of place that Manchester boosters and property developers have served up. But their inquiries into a bygone musical urbanism reviewed in this article have tended to adopt a totalizing, monadological orientation that overlooks the social and interprete ruptures of history and human geography—ruptures that have very often organized their point of inquiry. Such inquiries can reify social history and spatial relations into an illusory object, “place.” While reflections on musical places can make for inspired writing and enhance listeners’ pleasures, too often they neglect how contexts for “hearing the music of the city” are not always innocent.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2012 IASPM-US/Experience Music Project “Sounds of the City” conference in New York City. Thanks to Giacomo Bottá, Hua Hsu, Richard Lloyd, Andrew Stevens, and Eric Weisbard for helpful input and responses to this research.

Works Cited


Gee, Grant, dir. *Joy Division*. Weinstein Company, 2008. DVD.


